

## **MILLION HILLS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 21,296 acres**

The Million Hills Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-233) is located in northeastern Clark County, approximately 45 miles east of Las Vegas, Nevada, across Lake Mead in an area known as Gold Butte. Although relatively close to Las Vegas, the WSA is more than two hours driving time away. The study area contains 21,296 acres of public land. The border is composed of nine miles of section lines, 3.4 miles of fence bordering land reserved by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), 10.5 miles of road and physiographic features for 8.8 miles.

Million Hills WSA is an elongated shape, approximately 10 miles in length and slightly more than five miles wide, at its widest point. The Arizona-Nevada border is the eastern boundary of the WSA from the Thomas Gap Road south to BOR withdrawn land. Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LMNRA) is contiguous to the southern three miles of the WSA. The northeast boundary extends slightly more than one mile along the shoulder of the Thomas Gap Road from the Arizona-Nevada state line to a wash. The west boundary of the WSA starts at the Thomas Gap road and extends southwest, up a wash, to a mining exploration road, along the shoulder of that road south to the Garden Spring Road. The west boundary continues south along an old dirt road from the Garden Spring Road to the Devils Cove Road. The boundary continues south on the shoulder of the Devils Cove Road to the intersection of the road and BOR land in T.19S. R. 71E., section 31. BOR withdrawn lands, from the Devils Cove Road to the Arizona-Nevada border, is the southern boundary. The Garden Spring Road and the Azure Mine are cherry-stemmed from the west boundary of the WSA near Garden Spring for slightly over three miles into the center of the WSA.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -**

**0 acres recommended for wilderness  
21,296 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 21,296 acres for uses other than wilderness. The recommendation emphasizes maintaining access to the entire WSA for mineral exploration and extraction. The entire WSA has moderate nonmetallic mineral potential (dolomite and limestone) and the central portion has moderate metallic mineral potential (base metals). Of most significance is the presence of high grade cobalt in the area, which was identified in the Bureau of Mines Mineral Land Assessment Report of 1988 (MLA 34-88). Cobalt is currently listed as a Strategic and Critical Material. The collected samples showed a grade comparable to that found in the nation's only primary cobalt deposit.

The recommendation would also permit exploration of oil and gas within the northern portion of the WSA. Although the area rates a low potential for the occurrence of energy resources, exploration adjacent to the WSA has been active. In addition, interest has been expressed by the holder of the five oil and gas leases in the area to actively explore for energy resources.

The significant showing of cobalt in the area combined with the current interest (80 acres of mining claims) is sufficient evidence to conclude that in the future this area could produce significant quantities of important mineral resources.

The exploration and potential extraction of mineral resources in this WSA, particularly cobalt, will cause the loss of wilderness values. The projected exploration of some or all of the 80 acres of mineral claims and the 2,800 acres of oil and gas leases would affect an estimated 12,656 acres of the WSA. Even after mineral exploration, much of the extreme southern portion of the WSA will retain wilderness characteristics.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The WSA is primarily natural. The topography of the area's north half is composed of low ridges and gently rolling hills. Wide sand washes cut through the hills and alluvial slopes. The southern portion of the WSA consists of a north-south tilted ridge made up of colorful folds. The ridge gives way to numerous steeply rugged perpendicular drainages and canyons.

Several ways pass through the WSA. A two mile way runs through Immigrant Canyon from the Garden Springs Road to the Devil's Cove Road. A second way extends from the north side of Garden Springs Road along the wash's ridge line. A third way, about 1/2 mile long, comes into the WSA from the southwest and a fourth extends from Devil's Cove Road into New Spring Wash to a developed spring. The fifth way extends from the northeast boundary.

Two short barbed wire fences are located within the WSA for a total of 1.8 miles in the northeast corner and in the southwest. There are two developed springs present, New Spring in the southwest corner and Julies Spring northwest of Azure Ridge.

**B. Solitude:** Outstanding opportunities for solitude can be found within approximately 9,500 acres of the WSA. These opportunities are essentially offered by abundant rock outcrops along Azure Ridge and Million Hills. Combined vegetative cover of the mountain brush community and desert community species, and the numerous drainages and canyons provide essential features to enhance solitude opportunities.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** Recreational opportunities are good to excellent. There are fantastic scenic vistas, secluded spots and geologic features that would entice visitors for hiking, photography, nature study or backpacking. These opportunities are available in two distinct desert atmospheres. The northern portion provides a low desert environment with marginal desert landscape. The southern portion offers excellent opportunities in a mid-elevation mountain brush environment.

**D. Special Features:** The WSA offers excellent raptor nesting sites, few of which are found within the Las Vegas District. There is also a large population of burros. They congregate here because of the gentle sloping landscape and the proximity to water in Lake Mead.

The desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on April 2, 1990, has been identified within the WSA. A total of 8,960 acres of the study area have been identified as tortoise habitat.

### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

The entire study area can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve wilderness values now present. The area is a solid block of public land with no private inholdings, State lands or rights-of-way. The perimeter is easily identifiable on all sides, except for the eastern boundary on the Arizona-Nevada state line, or is contiguous to the LMNRA. Accessibility to off-highway vehicles (OHV) in the northern area would require additional commitment of resources to manage. Vehicular access would be mainly confined to the washes.

Five pre-FLPMA and two post-FLPMA mining claims are located in the central and west-central portion of the WSA, encumbering less than 120 acres. Five oil and gas leases, in the northwest portion of the WSA, encompass less than 2800 acres.

## **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The entire WSA has moderate nonmetallic mineral potential (dolomite and limestone) and twenty per cent of the WSA has moderate metallic mineral potential (base metals).

Field review of the area by the U.S. Bureau of Mines identified the presence of cobalt (strategic mineral) associated with manganese deposits. The presence of cobalt is of special significance as the grade is comparable to that found in the Blackbird Mining District in Idaho, the nations only primary cobalt deposit. Exploration of claims near the Azure Mine is projected. It is estimated that 6.4 acres of surface disturbance associated with three miles of road construction, drill pad construction and trenching of test pits would occur.

Million Hills WSA is considered to have low favorability for the occurrence of energy resources. Presently, there are five oil and gas leases (2,800 acres) in the study area. Based on current energy exploration activity occurring outside the WSA, it is projected that two exploratory wells would be drilled within the northwestern portion of the WSA. Surface disturbance from the wells would total approximately 13.5 acres, involving six acres for well pads cleared of surface vegetation and topsoil and the construction of 2.5 miles of access roads.

## **6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS**

In 1986, the area was reinstated in the wilderness study process as a result of an April 1985 decision in Sierra Club vs Watt concerning certain lands that were deleted from wilderness review in 1982 and 1983. As a result of the court case, the area was reinventoried to document wilderness characteristics.

Public comments received during the reinventory (1986) supported the wilderness study area status because of the following reasons: opportunities for solitude, naturalness, special features and close proximity to National Heritage Sites. Of the seven comments, four recommended that the area be designated wilderness. One comment specifically stated that the area should not be recommended for wilderness designation because of oil and gas and mineral resource potential.

Two public hearings were held during the public review period on the Draft EIS. The first was in Las Vegas, Nevada, on August 3, 1988. Oral statements were presented by 22 people. Six oral statements were presented at the second hearing in Reno, Nevada on August 4, 1988. None of the oral comments supported the all or partial wilderness alternatives and 2 supported the Proposed Action (No Wilderness Alternative).

Of 36 written comments, two supported the all wilderness recommendation, two favored the partial alternative and three supported no wilderness. The subjects of the comments were; desert tortoise, oil and gas leases, mineral resources, race courses, the possibility of adjacent wilderness in the LMNRA, wildlife habitat and watershed.

In a letter from the Clearinghouse of the State of Nevada, dated September 7, 1988, the Director of the Clearinghouse said, "...the State concurs with the recommendation presented in the document." The document referred to is the Draft Nevada Contiguous Lands Wilderness EIS.

The Great Basin Complex of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported the partial alternative to preserve the habitat of the desert tortoise.

No comments were received from Clark County.